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ABSTRACT

If college freshmen know something about syntax, have practiced combining and breaking down sentences, and have learned to think in terms of deep structures and surface structures, they may be better able to understand and relieve the discomfort caused by a garbled key sentence structure. Grammar instruction in freshman composition provides a vocabulary and a method for sorting out the semantic elements of a confused thought. One approach to integrating grammar into a regular freshman composition course is to break instruction into four modules: syntax, free sentence combining, directed sentence revision, and theory. The purposes of the syntax module are to activate students' awareness that sentences do have formal properties, to give them a vocabulary for discussing the properties, and to get them to apply their awareness when they feel uncomfortable about specific sentences they have written. The general goal of the sentence-combining module is practice in combining sentence kernels in various ways. At the same time, students are directed to revise specific sentences in their own papers. Theory is presented in the final quarter of the term. At this time the concept of deep structure is introduced, not as a psychological fact, but as a metaphor for how sentences might take shape in students' minds. This approach allows for individualized grammar study and sentence work in the context of current writing assignments and for writing assignments to be ordered to lend themselves to such study. (A course outline and sample exercise are appended.) (HOD)

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Basic Grammar and Freshman Composition

A few years ago I gave up teaching grammar in regular freshman courses, having finally become convinced that it had no place there when many of my students could not even copy accurately. Yet when I change hats and become a writer, I realize that I've always felt grateful to my ninth-grade English teacher for forcing me to parse and diagram sentences, and I know that I am not alone in attributing some of my writing skill to formal instruction in grammar. Is this a faulty attribution, as much research on grammar instruction suggests, or is there a benefit that has not yet been fully explored?[1] Obviously I believe there is, and this belief has led me to a different and more effective method of teaching grammar than either the parse-and-mimic or the transformational-generative methods, each of which I abandoned. This method is based on two hypotheses that I have not tested but that seem to underlie much of the recent discussion of grammar instruction. First, the ability to write clear sentences is useful at all stages of the composing process, not just at the polishing stage. Second, the writing anxiety generated in students by years of prescriptions can be assuaged by helping the students understand that unit of discourse they have always failed to control, the sentence.

In attending to my own writing I have noticed that even at the rough-draft stage, sometimes I am unable to proceed until I have formulated precisely and unambiguously what I want to say. That is, a sentence suddenly becomes important within the texture of the composition. It is true that

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our students struggle too often over individual sentences and need help in achieving simple fluency. At the same time, the shape of a sentence may determine the subsequent sentences that sentence might generate. The writer cannot always transcribe "inner speech," as we imply when we tell our students to "just write." According to Vygotsky, inner speech is characterized by predication and abbreviation, by a predominance of sense over meaning, and by a predominance of context over sentences.[2] Transcribed inner speech will be unintelligible to the student as soon as the student begins to behave as a writer with the job of communicating to a reader. For instance, anyone who follows what Peter Elbow calls the "loop writing process" needs to be able to construct an occasional polished sentence to focus what has just been scrawled out on a page and to provide a starting point for the next collection of ideas.[3]

Now, when I try to construct a focusing sentence I often bury my key idea in a prepositional phrase or dependent clause. The sentence then makes me feel uncomfortable, so I finally apply a procedure like Lanham's "Paramedic Method" to relieve that feeling and clarify the sentence. Sometimes the discomfort can be quite subtle, consisting of nothing more than a "read it again" stimulus." It was not until several years into graduate school that I became sensitive to that feeling of discomfort and was able to evolve a sentence-analyzing procedure for discovering what I really want as the actor-action relationship in the problem sentence. Our students experience the same kind of discomfort; it takes very little probing in conference to ascertain this fact, and the fact is encouraging.[4] What they lack is an understanding of what the discomfort means and a willingness to attend to it. If they know something about syntax, if they have practiced combining and breaking down sentences, and if they have learned to think in terms of

deep structures and surface structures, they may be better able to understand and relieve the discomfort caused by a garbled key sentence.[5] This benefit, let me stress, has little to do with constructing longer or more mature sentences. Even my weakest writers can be taught to mimic and even to construct complex sentences, but as often as not the sentences they write in their own drafts will make no sense. Grammar instruction provides a vocabulary and a method for sorting out the semantic elements of a confused thought.

The second benefit, likewise, has to do with demystifying the composing process and is related to student expectations. Sometime before they enter our freshman classrooms, most students get the feeling that grammar instruction is important, and they feel deprived if they aren't provided with it. Just because by grammar they usually mean prescriptive grammar does not make their concern unimportant. In fact they may be responding to the connection between understanding sentences and gaining power over writing.[6] If they do not know where their ideas or their sentences come from, they are limited to that mysterious flow of which they speak so glowingly when they have it and so longingly when they don't. When important sentences have to be built, the students with an awareness of basic grammar may be handier at that building and may more readily give it a try. Furthermore, they may be more willing to use pre-formed beginning and transition sentences, such as "I want to tell you about X" and "Having discussed X, now I'm going to discuss Y," to get started and to keep the words flowing.

Having discussed these process benefits, now I am going to discuss one way to integrate grammar instruction into regular freshman composition. I have broken down this instruction into four modules: syntax, free sentence-combining, directed sentence revision, and theory. (Appendix A provides

a sample outline for the grammar component of a forty-class-hour term.) As will become apparent, the method is not for a Basic Writing or ESL course but for the average freshman course. The more I teach, the more convinced I become that this course provides the greatest number of obstacles for the teacher. The students vary radically in their preparation, their motivation, and their level of intellectual and moral development, and they are likely to have a complex and rigid set of counterproductive rules.[7] For this reason, little class time is devoted to grammar instruction; much of the work gets done in conference.

The purposes of the syntax module are, first, to activate students' awareness that sentences do have formal properties, second, to give them a vocabulary for discussing the properties, and third, to get them to apply their awareness when they feel the least bit of discomfort about specific sentences they have written.[8] I use only the most basic terminology, hence the phrase "basic grammar" in my title; the terms are complete thought, actor/action, dependence, verb tense, modification, kernels, transformations, and embedding/substituting/unpacking.[9] Notice that none of these terms identifies an error. D'Eloia argues that all grammar study should serve the elimination of error.[10] She may be right for the Basic Writing level, but for an average freshman class I want to enlist grammar study in the service of clarity and precision. My position, however, is only tentative. I have not seen any comparisons between how general readers react to actual errors in Standard English and how they react to vague or impossible predications, for instance.[11]

I begin the syntax module with an exercise in classifying Standard English sentences, incomplete thoughts, illogical statements, jabberwocky, and sentences containing erroneous forms, and I encourage students to use

these terms during the course as a way of classifying their intuitive responses to sentences. (See Appendix B for the exercise I use here.) The concepts of completeness, actor action, and dependence come next; I introduce them one at a time, using sentences from the classification exercise as examples. To present verb tenses I give a homework exercise in grouping verbs and verbal phrases and identifying tense markers. Modification, likewise, is introduced using contrastive analysis, except that the at-home exercise calls for listing words, phrases, and clauses that can fit into specified slots in sentences.[12] This exercise allows me to lead into the operations of embedding and substituting, using the terms kernel and transformation. As important as the actual operations is the principle behind them: that a sentence is a structure, not just a linear string of words. Here the distinction between reading as a linear activity and writing as a recursive activity becomes useful. At the same time, I try to introduce students to the similarity between working with a sentence and working with a paragraph; both are structures which can contain a variety of components depending on the writer's purpose, and neither is usually written in one single attempt.

Now, because the students can generate sentences, unlike many Basic Writers, I am able to base my contrastive/inductive exercises on what the students have written. That is, we approach syntax in the context of current writing assignments. The total class time I spend on syntax is about one hundred minutes out of the first ten hours of the forty-hour term. The other important ingredient is conference work. I spend about thirty minutes in conference with each student each week, usually in two sessions, in addition to mini-conferences during class meetings; one third of this time is spent on sentence structure. I can think of no other way to acknowledge the differences

among my students, and dragging an entire class through a drill wastes time. I do not mean to denigrate the detailed step-by-step exercises worked out for Basic Writing and ESL classes, but for an average freshman course they are most useful as guides in preparing on-the-spot exercises for each student, starting at the exact point where the individual student's confusion begins and using sentences from that student's most recent writing. Later in the term, some group work might be appropriate, if most of the class members are at a similar level. For instance, in conjunction with writing a paragraph of definition, the class might be asked to complete various sentences of definition like those they find in their reading.

The general goal of the sentence-combining module is practice in combining kernels in various ways.[13] I introduce sentence combining in conjunction with the syntax unit on modification, a quarter of the way through the term, and because the activity is so new to most students I work through exercises in class. In addition to familiarizing students with the combining procedure, this helps get them in the habit of vocalizing various versions. We begin with embedding single-word adjectives and -ly adverbs, then adjective phrases. In subsequent exercises we take up other types of combinations, following the sequence of levels suggested by Charles Cooper: adjective phrase embedding, adjective clause embedding, noun clause substitution, noun phrase substitution. As Cooper points out, the teacher "accelerates growth toward written syntactic maturity if he can help students increase the amount of modification around their nouns and help them use noun substitutes (phrases and clauses) in place of single-word nouns."[14] While actual classroom work proceeds slowly through the term, I encourage individuals to progress at whatever rate will keep them stimulated, and I use conference time to discuss such advanced work and to suggest more. For those students whose syntax is already fairly mature

and who might become bored in the second half of the term, I provide combining exercises based on complex academic idioms, for instance taking the introductory phrase "if for no other reason than," adding a that-clause, and attaching the entire subordinate group to an independent clause. Another challenge is the one-page sentence exercise, in which a single thought is sustained by using all available tools of punctuation, syntax, and repetition. The key factor here is determining each student's level of syntactic maturity and working from that point.

Unpacking is taken up in the second half of the term, after the students are in the habit of thinking about kernels. This can be treated as a team game in the classroom rather than as homework; the winning team of course is the one that most completely unpacks a given sentence. A variation is unpacking and repacking--one group repacks a sentence whose initial form they don't know. Neither in the combining exercises nor in the unpacking exercises, however, do I try to introduce the students to formal transformations as such. I don't try to provide them with rules for transforming one structure into another. I use the word transformation primarily to emphasize the nature of the activity that produces well-formed sentences. I also emphasize that transforming sentences is analogous to transforming paragraphs. For instance, the distinction between substituting and embedding is similar to the choice a writer might make in composing a paragraph--do I replace a general example with a more specific one, or do I insert a detailed example between a general example and the point to which the general example is leading?

At the same time I introduce combining in class I begin to direct students to revise specific sentences in their own papers.[15] I do this in conference, using the terminology developed in the syntax module and drawing connections

with the combining exercises. In this directed revision I keep in mind Cooper's sentence-combining sequence and try to push each student each week. For students who have trouble hearing or repeating differences between various versions of a sentence, a five-minute cassette recording, made during the conference, is helpful.

I begin to talk about theory in the final quarter of the term. By extending the unpacking game to all the propositions in a sentence, I can introduce the concept of deep structure, not as a psychological fact but as a metaphor for how sentences might take shape in our minds.[16] I think it is helpful for students to be able to say in their own words something like "When my words aren't flowing, it may mean that the sentence I've written doesn't correspond to the sentence I'm feeling." By discussing whether or not people really do think in terms of actor and action, we can also more fully appreciate the stylistic choice involved in deciding between passive and active, for example. Analysis of ambiguous sentences, or, more likely to evoke lively responses, ambiguous newspaper headlines, can be carried out in the context of a discussion of deep structure. I do not want to turn my students into linguists or grammarians, but I see no reason not to think of this component of freshman composition as something akin to "physics for non-majors." Why not have a "linguistics for non-majors" as part of the composition course? An added advantage is that students can be introduced to the study of writing as an intellectually challenging discipline with a growing body of theory and some fundamental disagreements.[17] I am not averse to seeing a significant intellectual content in freshman English, and I feel that when my students realize they should take notes in an English class, they have learned to respect the discipline.[18]

Essentially what I am arguing for is individualized grammar study and

sentence work in the context of current writing assignments, and for writing assignments to be so ordered that they lend themselves to such study. It is not particularly difficult to coordinate terms and concepts with specific sentence-level features relevant to what the students are working on in any given week, for instance, coordinating verb-tense sequences with narration, modification with description, as long as the early assignments, especially, are short and frequent. Nor is it difficult to keep track of the progress of each student, if conferences occur several times a week and if the teacher adheres to a sequence of skills and provides the students with some work each day. It might be difficult, though, to assign a grade to this grammar study. I evade the problem by just keeping a record of whether or not each assignment is done and how thoroughly each is done (not how correctly). If the students have worked conscientiously with sentences all term, they have met the objectives of this part of the course and are graded accordingly.[19]

Appendix A: Course Outline (Forty-Class-Hour Term)

Topic	Class Hour	Time Needed (minutes)	Type of Presentation
Classifying Sentences	2	35	Group exercise; summary of points by instructor.
Completeness	3	5	Lecture, with emphasis on definitions and paradigms.
Actor/Action	4	5	(As above.)
Dependence	5	5	(As above.)
Verb Tense	8	35	Group discussion of homework; summary by instructor.
Modification	10	15	(As above.)
Embedding Single-Word Modifiers	10	30	Instructor-led sample exercise.
Embedding Adj. Modifiers (Phrases)	11	20	Small-group sample exercises.
Embedding Adj. Mods. (Clauses)	15	30	Instructor-led sample, then small-group exercise.
Substituting Noun Clauses	17	30	(As above.)
Substituting Noun Phrases	20	30	(As above.)
Unpacking Noun Clauses and Phrases	22	20	Instructor-led sample.
(continued)	23	30	Small groups; unpacking game.
(continued)	24	30	Group exercise: reducing nominalization.
Unpacking Full Sentences	28	30	Small-group exercise; summary by instructor.
Deep Structures	30	20	Discussion; summary by instructor.
Passives	32	20	Instructor-led sample.
Ambiguity	34	30	Small-group study of ambiguous headlines.
Mature Combs.	35	15	Instructor-led sample.

(And continue with that until the end of the term.)

Appendix B

EXERCISE: RECOGNIZING STANDARD ENGLISH SENTENCES (SES)

Identify the SES below. Arrange those word groups which are not SES into categories and write a sentence explaining why the word groups in each category are not SES.

1. Boy hit the man the.
2. Thomas would like people to understand themselves better.
3. His radson rolters brashed belligerently.
4. He runned the hundred in nine seconds flat.
5. Who were forced to live on a reservation.
6. My old toothbrush is new.
7. The roof was insulted.
8. Buses that come late.
9. Because the troops lost the battle, the general was demoted.
10. Tomorrow are going we home.
11. Because, in spite of everything we tried, there was no way to help.
12. My mother was work all day and half the night.
13. For such people there is no hope.
14. A society of ants are like human societies.
15. We listened to the green noise but couldn't hear anything.
16. Our preacher beginning with the story of Adam.
17. Bob Dylan is a good example of rock music.
18. I suggest that you just go ahead and agree to him.

Note: This exercise draws from Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (N. Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), especially p. 130.

Notes

[1] For an excellent review of the research, see Elizabeth F. Haynes, "Using Research in Preparing to Teach Writing," English Journal, 67 (Jan. 1978), pp. 82-88. One of the useful cautions in this review is that while sentence-combining instruction definitely works in the short run, there is as yet no research showing that the increased syntactic fluency endures (p. 84). Some other discussions of what the research does and does not show are these: Elaine Chaika, "Grammars and Teaching," College English, 39 (1978), 770-83; Sarah D'Eloia, "The Uses--and Limits--of Grammar," in The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, ed. Gary Tate and P. J. Corbett (N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 225-43; Martha Kolln, "Closing the Books on Alchemy," CCC, 32 (1981), 139-51; Anthony R. Petrosky, "Grammar Instruction: What We Know," English Journal, 66 (Dec. 1977), pp. 86-88. My approach to teaching grammar has been greatly influenced by Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), especially Chapters iii and iv (Syntax and Common Errors). In "Twelve Steps to Using Generative Sentences and Sentence Combining in the Composition Classroom," CCC, 32 (1981), 295-307, Glenn J. Broadhead and James A. Berlin present an approach similar to mine. They too emphasize leading the student to see that language is structured, enhancing the student's awareness of those structures through contrastive exercises both oral and written, and relating the writing of sentences to the writing of larger units of discourse. Their article, however, is frighteningly self-assured. They make frequent statements about what the students "will" see, what they can "soon" perceive, after instruction amounting to "several class meetings" (p. 295). The authors describe "various tests" that have "demonstrated the

effectiveness of this method" (p. 305), but they seem unaware of the need for testing that goes beyond a simple comparison between the traditional writing class and one that makes use of recent advances. Nor do they seem to have taken into account the Hawthorne effect.

[2] Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, Thought and Language, transl. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Mass.: M. I. T. Press, 1962), pp. 98-100, 142-48.

[3] Peter Elbow, Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), Chapter viii.

[4] On the use and importance of intuitions in writing, see William F. Irmscher, "The Teaching of Writing in Terms of Growth," English Journal, 66 (Dec. 1977), pp. 33-36, and Teaching Expository Writing (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), Chapter iv, "Acknowledging Intuition."

[5] Lester Faigley suggests that "syntactic-based instruction demystifies the act of writing" and so leads to improvement in the overall quality of student writing. "Generative Rhetoric as a Way of Increasing Syntactic Fluency," CCC, 30 (1979), 181.

[6] Shaughnessy writes that "The discovery by a student that he can do something he thought he couldn't releases the energy to do it" (p. 127).

[7] See Mike Rose's excellent "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block," CCC, 31 (1980), 389-401.

[8] On the use of the contrastive analysis method, see Suzette Haden Elgin, "Don't No Revolutions Hardly Ever Come by Here," College English, 39 (1978), 784-89.

[9] The idea for "unpacking," as well as the term, is from Donald C. Freeman, "Phenomenal Nominals," CCC, 32 (1981), 183-88. Shaughnessy suggests four basic grammatical concepts: the sentence, inflection, tense, and agreement (pp. 131-37).

[10] D'Eloia, p. 231. For a different view see Thomas Farrell, "Literacy, The Basics, and All that Jazz," College English, 38 (1977), 443-59.

[11] After reading Joseph Williams' "The Phenomenology of Error," CCC, 32 (1981), 152-68, I am convinced that many errors in Standard English are not at all damaging outside the English classroom.

[12] For a summary and evaluation of the contrastive analysis hypothesis in two different forms, see Ronald Wardhaugh, "The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis," TESOL Quarterly, 4 (1970), 123-30.

[13] I am assuming that the reader is aware of recent work in sentence combining. A brief and lucid rationale is provided by William Strong, "Back to Basics and Beyond," English Journal, 65 (Feb., 1976), pp. 56, 60-64. Of historical interest is John C. Mellon, "Assumptions and Hypothesis [of Transformational Sentence-Combining]," in Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings, ed. W. Ross Winterowd (N.Y.: Harcourt, 1975), pp. 365-80. Criteria for research and an explanation of one program are provided by Donald A. Daiker, et. al., "Sentence-Combining and Syntactic Maturity in Freshman English," CCC, 29 (1978), 36-41.

[14] Charles R. Cooper, "An Outline for Writing Sentence-Combining Problems," English Journal, 62 (Jan. 1973), pp. 96-102, 108.

[15] Obviously, for directed sentence revision to work, the teacher should make few if any marks on the papers except those indicating the

sentences to be revised.

[16] In the past decade the hypothesis that readers parse sentences by going from surface structure to semantic meaning by way of undoing transformations has been discounted. See George L. Dillon, Language Processing and the Reading of Literature: Toward a Model of Comprehension (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), p. xvi.

[17] See Richard E. Young's discussion of the "current-traditional paradigm" in his "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention," in Research in Composing: Points of Departure, eds. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978), pp. 29-48.

[18] An informal poll I take in my first-term freshman courses yields the result that ten percent of my students regularly took notes in high-school English classes, whereas eighty-five percent did so in history and in science classes.

[19] Here are some brief and useful "grammar books": N. R. Cattell, The New English Grammar: A Descriptive Introduction, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: M. I. T. Press, 1969); D. Terence Langdoen, The Study of Syntax: The Generative-Transformational Approach to American English (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1969); Bruce L. Liles, An Introductory Transformational Grammar (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971); Constance M. Weaver, Grammar for Teachers: Perspectives and Definitions (Urbana: NCTE, 1979).